

Solidarity

& Workers' Liberty



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For a workers' government

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**POVERTY
AND DEATH**

What is the Alliance for Workers' Liberty?

Today one class, the working class, lives by selling its labour power to another, the capitalist class, which owns the means of production. Society is shaped by the capitalists' relentless drive to increase their wealth. Capitalism causes poverty, unemployment, the blighting of lives by overwork, imperialism, the destruction of the environment and much else.



Against the accumulated wealth and power of the capitalists, the working class has one weapon: solidarity. The Alliance for Workers' Liberty aims to build solidarity through struggle so that the working class can overthrow capitalism. We want socialist revolution: collective ownership of industry and services, workers' control and a democracy much fuller than the present system, with elected representatives recallable at any time and an end to bureaucrats' and managers' privileges. We fight for the labour movement to break with "social partnership" and assert working-class interests militantly against the bosses. Our priority is to work in the workplaces and trade unions, supporting workers' struggles, producing workplace bulletins, helping organise rank-and-file groups. We are also active among students and in many campaigns and alliances.

- We stand for:**
- Independent working-class representation in politics.
 - A workers' government, based on and accountable to the labour movement.
 - A workers' charter of trade union rights — to organise, to strike, to picket effectively, and to take solidarity action.
 - Taxation of the rich to fund decent public services, homes, education and jobs for all.
 - A workers' movement that fights all forms of oppression. Full equality for women and social provision to free women from the burden of housework. Free abortion on request. Full equality for lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Black and white workers' unity against racism.
 - Open borders.
 - Global solidarity against global capital — workers everywhere have more in common with each other than with their capitalist or Stalinist rulers.
 - Democracy at every level of society, from the smallest workplace or community to global social organisation.
 - Working-class solidarity in international politics: equal rights for all nations, against imperialists and predators big and small.
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Student campaign “grows up”

By Bob Sutton,
Liverpool Guild of
Students VP-elect
(pc)

The results of the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts conference, held at Birmingham Guild of Students on 4 June, mean that the campaign can now get ready for, and help to lead, the next wave of student struggles.

Despite being in the middle of school and university exams, the conference attracted between 90 and 100 people, with delegations from areas and institutions including Royal Holloway, London Met, Westminster, UCL, Birmingham, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Glasgow, Merseyside, Aberystwyth, Hull, Sheffield, Lincoln, Nottingham, Oxford, the Open University and Northern Ireland.

Although the big majority were not in socialist groups, there were comrades present from Workers Power, the SWP, Counterfire, the Socialist Party, and AWL. There

were Green Party members in attendance. A number of education workers took part.

After a long period of discussion and controversy in the NCAFC, the conference decided by a big majority to create a national steering committee, as well as reviving regional structures. There was a lot of enthusiasm about standing for the committee, with 25 candidates for 14 places. It was an open election, run under Single Transferable Vote, not the pre-arranged slate presented at many left conferences.

The opening session of the conference split into workshops which reported back with short motions on campaigning priorities ranging from solidarity with the 30 June strikes, to organising among school students, to organising a national demonstration next term. More details will be up on the NCAFC website soon. The conference reaffirmed its support for free education for all, funded by taxing the rich. A school/college students' caucus and a women's

caucus were also held.

The final session featured presentations from Carl Mandy, a sixth form teacher and NUT activist in Egham about the upcoming strikes; London Met students on their fight against cuts; and Rebecca Galbraith and Yassin Hussein from Action for ESOL on fight to defend ESOL provision and against immigration controls. Michael Chessum, one of NCAFC's founders and just elected to NUS national executive, closed the conference, arguing that "NCAFC has grown up" and that, while not the largest, this was the best and most representative NCAFC conference yet.

The NCAFC remains the only broad, democratic campaign uniting militant

student activists across the country — and the only national student campaign that is not the closely-guarded property of a particular socialist organisation, but a space in which activists of various affiliations or none can organise effectively together.

Having established clear, accountable structures, it is well placed to play a central role in mobilising a new wave of student struggles against cuts, and AWL students for our part will be working hard to make that happen.

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A bloody nose for Berlusconi

By Hugh Edwards

In the second round of Italy's administrative and regional elections last month the seven million who voted gave Berlusconi a reply neither he nor his media empire anticipated.

His own city base, Milan, lost heavily to the centre-left.

Napoli, a city in the hands of the centre left for years, corrupt and inefficient, was won overwhelmingly by the young radical ex-magistrate De Magistris of di Pietro, (Italy of the Values).

Trieste, historically the most right-wing place in Italy, is now in the hands of a former Communist of the centre-left.

Cagliari in Sardinia was seized from the right by the party of SEL (Left, Ecology, Liberty) led by Nicki Vendola, president of the region of Puglia and former leader of Rifondazione Comunista.

Across the whole country the same pattern was repeated.

The results of these elections underline dramatically the condition of ever-deepening crisis — economic, social, political — in evidence everyday across the country. And with it a growing sense of anger at and hatred for Berlusconi's regime.

This is an economy which has failed to grow

for at least 20 years, wages stagnating for the same period, investment at a minimum. Public debt second only to Greece in Europe. Tax evasion and corruption a way of life, and the presence of the Calabrian mafia everywhere.

Unemployment, officially at 8.3%, absolute poverty 13%, with 25% in the frame in the not too distant future. 30% youth unemployment, millions of others condemned to humiliatingly insecure work.

And the picture for women even worse, with the lowest percentage in work of the major industrial nations, and two million in the south no longer registering for work. And tellingly for a country led by a compulsive sexist 800,000 women last year were forced to leave their jobs on becoming pregnant, courtesy of the reintroduction of a decree making it necessary for woman to sign a letter on appointment agreeing to resign if pregnant.

Add to this the desperately grim situation of pensioners, nearly 60% living on 500 euro a month!

For the first time since he came back to power three years ago Berlusconi now finds himself in a corner. His party is in bits, held together by naked greed, blackmail and his own need to save himself from the courts.

The real dynamic and momentum of the voting,

especially in the large cities came from the young, many of whom are aligned or in the ambit of the more radical wings of the centre-left.

The Democratic Party have cowardly, cravenly cautious bureaucratic leaders who instinctively align with the right-wing centre parties outside the official centre-left. But they were thrown on to the back foot by the radical momentum.

Therefore the presence and militant involvement of the young may be a positive harbinger of a potential development of political maturity in a country where for decades now an effective sub-political "revolutionary" current has prevailed among thousands of activists.

For the centre-left to be revived as an alternative administration, it will have to find how to square the increasingly radically sounding measures and hopes of those behind the victories in the elections with the European financiers dictat that to keep the Italian ship of state afloat another 46 billion euros will need to be extracted from the hide of the masses.

The inevitable clash between the expectations and hopes of many and the real politik of the cynical leaders of the centre left may offer real opportunities for those capable of offering a more radical alternative.

The urgent constitution

of such a force is the necessary. The omens , alas, aren't good. The fall-out from the split in RC has, as predicted, seen its two factions closer to to the parliamentary electoral arena of the centre left.

The legacy of Stalinism and those in the 60s who opposed it — Negri, Tronti, Cacciari, Asor Rosa Sofri and those like Bertinotti after them — whatever positive contribution they may have made — is effectively to have stripped the theoretical apparatus of revolutionary socialism of what, without, it is nothing. That is an analytical tool of concrete reality from which to draw the lines of march of a political strategy upon which alone a mass working-class led organisation can be built in the struggle for power.

"The decisive element in every situation is the permanently organised and long prepared force which can be put into the field when its judged that a situation is favourable (and it can be favourable only in so far as such a force exists, and is full of fighting spirit)." (Antonio Gramsci.)

That is the task at the forefront of any serious militant in Italy today.

Referendums that can sink Berlusconi!
www.workersliberty.org/sinkberlusconi

US looks for deal with Taliban

By Martin Thomas

The USA is stepping up its efforts to negotiate a deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Whether it can succeed is another matter.

Britain and the US are pressing the United Nations to drop sanctions against Taliban leaders. The US is backing diplomatic moves to get a public Taliban political office set up somewhere in the region.

The USA has already had talks with the Taliban, as has the Kabul government. It has quietly dropped its previous pre-conditions that the Taliban must break links with al Qaeda, renounce violence, and accept the Afghan constitutions.

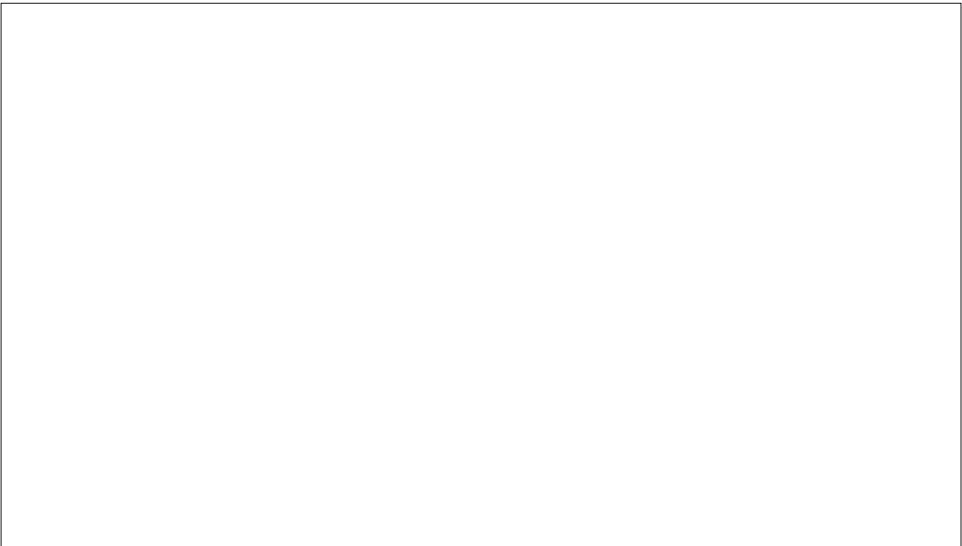
Speaking to the BBC on 21 May, President Obama defined his aim as “a political settlement” achieved by “talking to the Taliban”.

This month NATO will formally hand over “security” in seven provinces (those least hit by the Taliban) to the Afghan army. That handover process is supposed to extend to the whole of Afghanistan by 2014. In July the USA will announce a cut in the number of soldiers it has in Afghanistan, currently 100,000.

But the cut may well be less than the increase in the US military presence in Afghanistan made by Barack Obama in 2009. Despite that increase, US military chiefs are very cautious about claiming progress. “This is going to be a very difficult fighting season”, said US military supremo Michael Mullen on 1 June.

Since the US military arrived in Afghanistan, in the wake of the Al Qaeda bombing of New York’s World Trade Centre in 2001, it has always been able to defeat the Taliban in selected areas.

The problem starts then. Direct US military rule is unviable and unpopular. But officials from Kabul whom the US might install are often also unpopular,



US troops approach Afghan man for questioning

and anyway corrupt and often ineffectual. In that respect the US is even worse off than the Russian would-be conquerors of Afghanistan in 1979-89, who at least had a corps of committed and energetic Afghan Stalinists to work with.

The Taliban can melt away into other areas, or over the border into Pakistan, and then return. In the countryside they never imposed the same harsh clerical-fascist regime which they had in Kabul in 1996-2001.

KABUL
On all accounts, they are not that unpopular in many areas of rural Afghanistan, especially since a lot of the most anti-Taliban people have moved to Kabul, which since 2001 has expanded from 400,000 people to 4.5 million.

The USA’s evident desire to withdraw and negotiate simultaneously weakens their hand in negotiations. The Taliban can afford to stall negotiations and wait until the USA gives up.

The US spends over \$100 billion on war in Afghanistan. It budgets to spend \$13 billion in the next fiscal year in subsidising the Afghan army, which is now almost 300,000 strong (and might be able to defend Kabul

and some other areas against the Taliban; but has no hope of gaining control of the whole country, especially not of the Taliban’s Pashtun heartland).

The country’s total economic output totals only \$17 billion. In Kabul especially, since 2001, the Americans have created a society which lives almost entirely on the gravy and spillage from the vast US expenditure. In 2010 about \$850 million disappeared from a Kabul bank, embezzled somehow.

As Jason Burke reports (*Guardian*, 4 June), in Kabul “there are blocks of luxury apartments, giant video hoardings, BMWs and Hummers blasting their way through the traffic... vast and garish villas... restaurants where lunch is 30 times the average daily wage”. Meanwhile rural Afghanistan is much as it has been for centuries, plus bombs and foreign troops. The Kabul government, bloated and nauseous through overfeeding with US aid, can get little grip there.

Some reporters highlight an additional problem in divisions among the anti-US forces in Afghanistan, including those operating under the broad umbrella of the Taliban.

It is impossible to defeat the Taliban as long as they have a safe base over the border in north-west Pak-

istan. Riddled, by all accounts, with Islamist sympathisers, the Pakistani armed forces are unable to gain control there. Pakistani military leaders other than Islamists also have an interest in keeping Afghanistan fragmented and at war: a strong and relatively stable Afghanistan could ally with India and be a threat to Pakistan.

Pivotal to any real way forward must be an advance by the potentially-powerful Pakistani workers’ movement, sweeping aside the Islamists and offering real progress to the rural poor. Short of that, there is impasse.

The entire grotesque story has its roots in the imperial arrogance of the US administration which, in 2001, thought it could get quick and easy “revenge” for the World Trade Centre bombing by zapping the Taliban and then quickly “cleaning up” Afghanistan. Ten years later, Afghanistan is nowhere near “cleaned up”, and the Taliban is stronger than it was in the months after the fall of its rule in Kabul.

By now, the conclusion must be that any good the US, British, and other troops do in fending off the Taliban is quickly outmatched by simultaneous or rapidly-following damage.

Three dictators wobble, but don’t yet fall

By Colin Foster

On Saturday 4 June, one of the three remaining Arab despots confronting mass rebellions — Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen — seemed to concede defeat, fleeing to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment. It was reported that 35 top officials had fled with him.

Tens of thousands celebrated in the capital, Sanaa, on Sunday 5 June.

But on Monday 6 June, Abdu-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, deputising for Saleh, refused to meet the opposition parties to discuss a transfer of power. He said Saleh would soon return, and there could be no talks until then.

The USA and the EU are urging Saleh to step down.

If Saleh digs in, the fragile semi-truce in Sanaa will surely break down, and open armed conflict break out again.

Aside from the main confrontation between an opposition bloc and Saleh, Al Qaeda supporters are reported to have seized the city of Zinjibar.

In Libya, after a period of stalemate, on 6 June the Benghazi-centred rebels took the city of Yafran. Al Jazeera reports that more Qaddafi officers have defected, and many reporters say that the quiet in Tripoli, under Qaddafi’s control, is fragile, hiding mass discontent.

Russia has accused NATO of “mission creep”, charging that the NATO powers will soon have ground troops in Libya. Although British and French helicopter gunships have been deployed in recent days, stepping up the NATO aerial operation, the British government denied any intention of using

“combat” ground troops.

In Syria, too, the dictatorship, which a few weeks look poised to crush the rebellion at least for the time being, is in trouble.

On Monday 6 June it claimed that the opposition had killed 120 police, in an attempt to provide a pretext for increased repression.

As Joshua Landis of Syria Comment sums it up, “the government has met with no success in quelling the revolt despite an escalating death rate and an ever more ruthless crack down”.

Syrian opposition forces — Kurdish groups, the Muslim Brotherhood, and various Western-based exiles — held a conference in Turkey, 31 May to 3 June.

After, reportedly, some wrangling with the Brotherhood, they agreed a more or less secular programme, with no social or economic demands: for Assad to go, and “for a pluralistic, parliamentary, and democratic regime”. Some exile oppositionists have dismissed the conference in Turkey as unrepresentative, but there is no sign yet of a clear left-wing or working-class pole within the opposition movement.

But it is immensely brave and continues to go on the streets week after week to risk death.



Qaddafi: fragile control?

Spanish “real democracy” movement and the unions

By James Bloodworth

The Spanish 15-M movement, called after the starting point on 15 May, is at present passing through a crucial stage. The continuing protests are uncomfortable for Spanish capitalism as it struggles to project an image of bourgeois respectability to the international markets.

But the “Genuine Democracy Now” movement is uncomfortable not only for them. In the offices of the UGT and CCOO (Spain’s largest trade union federations), the movement is also making some nervous.

Since the general strike of 29 September last year, when over 10 million workers downed tools, many on the left have increasingly come to view

union bureaucracies as in collusion with those seeking to force austerity on the population.

During the previous general strike, some union officials helped demobilise and water down resistance to the government’s programme of attacks. Pacts were agreed upon on the labour reform package and the raising of the retirement age — with some in the union hierarchy even claiming

the latter was “revolutionary”!

Like the trade unions, the Stalinist left, with its history of shady deals with capitalist parties, has also come to be seen, as one protester remarked, as “part of the furniture of capitalist society”.

The protesters themselves have faced accusations that they are apolitical.

In response they released

a manifesto on the 18 May, declaring “we have lost respect for the main political parties, but we have not lost our ability to criticise. On the contrary we are not afraid of politics. To express an opinion is politics. To look for alternative ways to participate is politics”.

Encouragingly, the manifesto also identified those responsible for the capitalist crisis: “the IMF, the Eu-

ropean Central Bank, the European Union, the credit rating agencies like Moody’s and Standard and Poor’s, the Popular Party and the Spanish Socialist Workers’ Party [Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero’s ruling party].”

A start, but still a long way from any kind of clear political answers. Nonetheless, the movement deserves solidarity.

We need a union campaign against anti-semitism

Eric Lee



If the British National Party were tomorrow to issue a report saying that Israeli Jews were responsible for the “ritual slaughter” of a Christian priest — as part of an effort to ethnically cleanse Palestine of Christians — we’d probably not be shocked. The BNP are, after all, the legitimate heirs of the British Union of Fascists.

If the ultra-right party of Jean Marie La Pen in France were to denounce the European Union Monitoring Commission’s (EUMC) definition of anti-semitism — because it implicated them as racists — we’d expect that of them. Much of what La Pen has said over the years puts him well within the EUMC definition of an anti-semite.

And if the former imperial wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, David Duke, were to allege that Jews engaged in organ harvesting, deliberately killing non-Jews and then selling their organs — well, that would hardly be surprising. Duke is notorious Holocaust denier, an honored guest in Tehran. We expect nothing less of him.

But if trade unions were to say any of these things, we might be a bit alarmed.

And trade unions have said all three recently.

Some unions in their rush to support the Palestinian cause have crossed red lines and adopted traditional anti-semitic images and messages.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions recently published a report of a delegation from NIPSA, the public sector union in Northern Ireland, to Israel and Palestine. The report is full of anti-Israel references, which was to be expected. But the report also includes, in passing, this account of the murder of a priest:

“He had been murdered with an axe in a ‘ritualistic’ manner on 16 November 1979 by Zionist settlers who wanted to cleanse the area of any trace of Christianity. Murdered whilst performing vespers, his eyes were plucked out and three of his fingers were cut off — the ones with which he made the sign of the Cross.” (The report neglects to mention that no one was actually arrested, let alone convicted, of this crime.)

The charge of ritual murder of Christians by Jews has deeply concerned the small Jewish community in Ireland.

Last week, the University and College Union conference and passed its usual resolution denouncing the Jewish state and calling for a boycott of Israel. But having come under fire in recent years for becoming a place where fewer and fewer Jewish academics felt comfortable, the UCU decided to do something about the allegations of anti-semitism.

It decided that it didn’t like the widely-accepted EUMC definition of anti-semitism and voted to reject it. This was replaced by... nothing. The union has basically said that anti-semitism doesn’t exist. That’s how it coped with the allegations.

Jewish leaders issued a public call on the union not to take this course. Their call was ignored.

In Sweden, the trade unions own a daily newspaper, *Aftonbladet*, which ran a two-page feature article alleging that Israeli soldiers harvest organs from dead Palestinians. And the newspaper linked this horrific allegation to arrests in the New York area of some rabbis which involved the sale of a kidney.

Israelis were shocked, and so was the Swedish ambassador to the country, who denounced the article. But the unions that own *Aftonbladet* said nothing.

Is there a pattern emerging here?

It is one thing to be critical of this or that Israeli policy. One can call for Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories, or speak out against the separation barrier, or denounce the Israeli blockade of Gaza — and all of that is legitimate criticism of the Jewish state.

But when you start talking about Jewish ritual murders of Christian priests, or organ-harvesting by the Israeli army, or deny the very existence of anti-semitism — you’ve crossed a red line. Trade unions in Europe, including in the UK, are increasingly crossing that line.

It’s not enough that the Jewish community has spoken out on this. Trade unionists must speak out and say that enough is enough — that anti-semitism has no place in our movement and should be outcast.

It’s time for a trade union campaign against anti-semitism in the UK and Ireland.

• UCU debate, see page 10

Ten worst demagogues

Press Watch

By Pat Murphy

DAILY
Mirror

Over the bank holiday weekend of 28-30 May a number of British papers covered stories on the “Ten worst excuses put forward by benefit cheats”. This was simple and yet carefully crafted populist journalism.

Crafted not only because it played to all the stereotypes of the poor, (feckless, swindling, on-the-make) but also because it had “watercooler currency”. The ten worst excuses were being swapped on radio phone-ins, comment columns and no doubt workplaces over the following days. For a short time public discussion about the welfare system and cuts was dominated by “yes, but have you heard the about the man who claimed that he was only carrying the ladders for therapy?” Or “the man who said someone stole his ID”? Or “it must have been my twin who was working while collecting benefit?”

The “ridiculous excuses” story featured prominently in the *Mail* and *Telegraph* and other outlets including the BBC.

All handy for a government taking some heat for the most savage cuts in welfare for 30 years. Convenient for a Department whose last brush with the media was a really effective demonstration by disability activists exposing the impact of new eligibility tests.

So which intrepid journalist dug their way into the dull world of benefit claim records and sifted out from millions of papers these pearls of chicanery? No, it is in fact the Government who carried out a “survey” as part of a crackdown on benefit and tax credit fraud. The *Mirror* quotes a “fraud chief”, Welfare Reform Minister, Lord Freud. The unelected Freud told the paper that “Our investigators are routinely dealing with bare-faced cheek and ridiculous excuses for stealing money from the tax payer.”

The *Guardian’s* Polly Toynbee pondered more on the story’s origin and motives. It turns out that it first saw light of day through a DWP press release. Toynbee is, she say, on the circulation list for all DWP press releases. And yet she wasn’t sent this one. When she contacted the DWP to enquire why she had been left off the list, it became clear that she was not the only one.

The story was released to only a small number of media organisations described by the Department as “key contacts”. According to the duty press officer who spoke to Toynbee “it was a soft consumer story, a PR story we sold proactively, so we didn’t sell it any wider”. In other words it was given to those papers who the government could trust to use it as they intended, no difficult questions asked.

Letters



Not out of our sight

Like anyone else who watched it, I felt sickened by Panorama’s expose of how people with learning disabilities were tortured by their carers at a private hospital near Bristol (31 May).

As a social worker who works with adults with learning disabilities I review placements like Winterbourne hospital fairly frequently. I’ve never seen anything like the treatment shown by the programme, but my heart often sinks when I walk into these places.

The closure of long-stay hospitals was heralded by many as the end of institutionalisation — and the end of the appalling treatment that went on. But “care in the community” was poorly planned, inadequately funded and later suffered from the purchaser/provider split in local authorities — care homes run by big companies and without the supervision and regulation needed. These placements are typically “warehouses” keeping vulnerable adults far away from the rest of society.

There are many questions about the psychology of the individuals who torture people they are meant to support, but it is well known that a bad culture can be created among carers by low-paid, poor training, over-work, all in a residential setting outside of regular view.

The Care Quality Commission is the regulatory body which oversees inspection for places like Winterbourne. They aim to inspect every two years “unannounced” and “announced”. But these inspections are always known about and the CQC inspection system rarely seems to criticise care homes or hospitals. To really safeguard the vulner-

The demonisation of the unemployed, poor and benefit claimants is a persistent and central part of what the right-wing press do and it extends far beyond the tabloids. The method too is as old as the hills. Take a microscopically small number of examples of apparent cheating, report them as if they are widespread and goad working, tax-paying citizens into hatred and contempt those less fortunate than them. The claim that benefit fraud is a major problem for public finances is nonsense. And it is nonsense consciously designed to take our eyes off the real scams and fraud that “steal money from the taxpayer” in the words of the warmly cosseted Lord Freud.

The cost to the taxpayer of alleged benefit and tax credit fraud is, according to the DWP press release, £1.6 billion. Of this £1.1 billion is benefit fraud. That is 0.7% of the total benefits bill or £59 for each of the 18.5 million claimants. On the other hand, MPs were asked to repay £1.2 million in wrongly claimed expenses. That is £1,858 for each MP.

Two of the worst culprits in the MPs expenses scandal now occupy cosy seats in the Department of Work and Pensions. Chris Grayling claimed thousands to renovate his flat in London even though his family home was only 17 miles away. Steve Webb claimed £8,400 for stamp duty after selling his flat and buying another 100 yards down the street.

Grayling recently claimed, wrongly, that 75% of people claiming incapacity benefits were fit for work. Another minister claimed, also wrongly, that more people received the higher rate of disability living allowance for alcohol and drug problems than for blindness. All reported as fact by the Government’s friends in the media.

All of these people are involved, day in and day out, in a propaganda war on the poor. For the most part the media are their allies in this war. “Ten worst excuses” shows up the scope of their “coalition of the willing”. It’s the job of the socialist press to expose the lies of these class warriors and to turn the spotlight instead on other fraud — £15 billion in tax fraud, the £70 billion in estimated tax avoidance and the £3.6 billion lost to fraud in the finance industry all of which you will struggle to find out about anywhere in the right wing press.

Anyone who has lived on benefits knows they are extremely hard to claim. The truth is millions are left unclaimed and claimants are scrutinised and stigmatised to ensure that it stays that way. An equally damning indictment of the rotten system we live under is that millions of people are dependent on benefits or credits not because they don’t have work but because they are paid such a pittance by employers that they couldn’t live without them.

It’s a point of socialist honour that we never allow the same bosses’ ideas factories to turn us against the most vulnerable and poor in our class with their lies, distortions and distractions.

able it is necessary to rock the boat, to say what many of the rich and powerful raking money in from companies like Castlebeck won’t want to hear. The system is not designed to allow anyone working in it to be critical.

There are huge problems with how people with learning disabilities are treated, and it is all made worse by increasing cuts and poverty. Most people with learning disabilities, their families and the people who work with them share lots of ideas about the solutions.

But a capitalist system where everyone is encouraged to look out only for themselves or their immediate families, where being a bit different or needing more support is viewed as entirely negative the kind of people we saw in this programme get a very raw end of the deal.

There is no investment in the “less profitable”. That is a waste of human potential.

Lynne Moffat, south London

Storming Pickles

On 24 May an anti-cuts group in Cambridge stormed the Cambridge Union debating society in protest against the presence of Tory Local Government Minister, Eric Pickles.

Earlier, a hundred activists from Cambridgeshire Against the Cuts picketed the entrances to the building. The Tory-led county council is making £160 million worth of cuts.

Rather than meet local people, Pickles chose to discuss his vision for local government with members of Cambridge University Conservative Association. This meeting was delayed and then disrupted as activists gained access to the building, banging drums and chanting slogans.

Reportedly private security guards hired by the Union were “out of control” and a police officer is alleged to have reassured bouncers that “all the force [they] used was reasonable”.

Several activists sustained injuries and a school student was dragged outside by the neck. So much for “civilised debate”.

Liam McNulty, Cambridge

The future under the Tory cuts: pauper old age

The capitalist free market means luxury for those with sharp elbows — and being trampled underfoot for those whose elbows have become frail with age.

Thirty thousand old and frail people in care homes face disruption, and probably, some of them, being shunted to different places, as the country’s biggest private care homes operator, Southern Cross, goes bust.

Disruption and forced moves often kill old and frail people. If they don’t kill, they leave the elderly people frailer and more confused.

The plight of those 30,000 is only the top foliage of a forest in which market mechanisms grind harshly into the fragile fabric of elderly lives.

All of us, unless we die young through war, accident, or quick-killing disease, will grow old and fragile one day. For all of us, life will end “badly”. It doesn’t have to end in slow, painful horror. For many it does, under the current system; and the government’s cuts are making that worse.

The drastic cuts to public sector pension provision - which, if successfully, will have a ratcheting-down effect on the remaining occupational pension schemes for private sector workers - are set to deprive many of us of the protection that a passable pension can give.

In the 1990s the law was changed to make the National Health Service no longer responsible for long-term care of the frail elderly. The responsibility was shifted to local authorities, which provide or organise care at means-tested rates, with the detailed means-testing varying from local authority to local authority.

By the Blair and Brown governments as much as by the Tories, local authorities were pressured to contract out services to private-profit firms.

Now 70% of old people in care are in private care-homes, and 70% of care provided to frail old people in their homes is from private-profit firms.

The numbers are large. One half of all people over 85 are in care homes, and another 25% get commercial care in their homes.

PROFIT

There is sense in trying to move frail elderly people where possible out of hospitals — where the geriatric wards can be death-traps — into quieter, smaller-scale accommodation. Trouble is, it has been done according to the priorities of public-sector cost-cutting and private-sector profit-maximisation.

For the care-home profiteers, that was the opposite of trouble. The Blair government had helped them by setting the required standards low (only 50% of the staff need to have any relevant qualification; no minimum staff ratios; building standards to apply only to new starts, not to existing operations).

For a time, as one industry boss told the Financial Times (30 May), “it was a bit like the internet bubble”. Care home companies were as favoured by rich investors keen for quick profits as Silicon Valley firms. Or more so. The supply of old people couldn’t fail, and as long as you had a place with four walls and a roof, and a few minimum-wage workers to run it, your fortune was made. In this industry, you could just pocket the profits. You didn’t have to spend on new equipment and premises, or on training your staff. One finance director told a lawyer: “There is absolutely no room for anything to go wrong” (FT, 30 May).

He meant, for anything to go wrong for the owners. For the old people it was different. But where they were wealthy, articulate, or had articulate younger relatives with the money, energy, and house-space, the old people would be being looked after at home, often by relatives; or (as happens with a quarter of old people in care homes), their relatives would pay extra to get them into a slightly better care home.

In the “mass market” of elderly people ill-equipped to make complaints, and with support only from harassed younger relatives with too many problems of their own, the profiteers had fairly free rein. The occasional scandal about mistreatment was an affordable business expense.

The *Financial Times* has recently revealed that the official

The Blackstone private equity group walked away from Southern Cross with a fat profit

Care and Quality Commission ranks one in seven private care homes as “poor” or barely “adequate”, a much worse report than not-for-profit homes and the few remaining local authority homes (themselves far from ideal) get. But the FT had to dig that out of obscure reports.

Now some things are going wrong for the profiteers; and the old people are paying the heaviest price.

The care-home companies gained from owning lots of property, whose prices were soaring. Now the property prices have fallen (while rents, for companies like Southern Cross which rent their premises, have not).

For good reasons as well as cost-cutting ones, local authorities have pushed to have a bigger proportion of old and frail people cared for in their own houses rather than in institutions. Care homes now have a bigger proportion of much more fragile and sickly old people, often with a short time to live.

As the government has squeezed council budgets, so the councils have squeezed the amounts they will pay to care-home owners.

The top bosses of Southern Cross saw this coming. Four of them sold their shares in the company in late 2007, at a profit of £35 million, and over the next year or so quit to go to other jobs. They won’t suffer. The old people will.

Three answers:

- Support the strikes on 30 June, and spread into a struggle for a decent pension for everyone.
- Fight for shorter working hours, good work conditions, and decent affordable housing for everyone, so that younger people can afford to take elderly relatives into their homes and look after them without unmanageable strain.
- **Expropriate Southern Cross and all the private care-home chains, with no compensation for the profiteers. Reorganise care homes, and professional care provided to elderly people in their own houses, as a public service, free at the point of use, and staffed by qualified workers paid at trade-union rates.**

Behind the Southern Cross scandal

By a GMB member, organising in care homes

Southern Cross was bought up by a private equity firm called Blackstone; they then sold off all of Southern Cross’s property — that is, the actual care homes themselves.

The homes were sold off to all sorts of private companies, including the Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), which is owned by the Qatari royal family. These private companies then rented the property back to Southern Cross at extortionate rates. QIA has off-shore accounts, so it wasn’t even paying tax on all that rent it was making.

That situation was necessarily unsustainable. But when the cuts hit, funding for care was reduced so rents went up even further, and the whole thing has now exploded.

Southern Cross can’t afford to pay the rent on its own care homes, which its owners, Blackstone, sold off to make a quick buck. It was profit before people in the crudest sense imaginable.

From a workers’ point of view, Southern Cross isn’t a great employer. Workers are very low-paid and shifts can last up to 12 hours. Conditions in the homes themselves vary but some are very run down and quite depressing places to work. Homes are often very short staffed, so the quality of care goes down.

Care work is very hard; people don’t realise how manual it is, but when you’re having to physically lift people in and out of bed or help them go to the toilet, it’s a very manual job. Although workers are being demonised in the press over the current scandal, they are doing the job because they care.

Bosses are telling staff that everything’s going to be okay. Many Southern Cross workers are migrant workers who have English as a second language, and bosses are exploiting that to try and pull the wool over their eyes. But workers read the papers and we know what’s going on.

People are fed up. There’s a feeling of utter powerlessness. Southern Cross is undertaking a last ditch effort to try and save itself by making £20 million cuts. They haven’t spoken about redundancies yet but it’s difficult to see how they’ll be avoided.

Over 200 homes could also face closure. The GMB is trying to fight for our members around that restructuring, but the situation is very difficult.

Get the market out of social care!

Extract from policy passed at GMB Congress 2011

Congress deplores the fact that in 21st century Britain our elderly, vulnerable and most dependent are so undervalued that they are left at the mercy of big business and the private sector, where cost and shareholder profit take precedence over the care, protection and security of those least able to defend themselves.

It is time for a fresh start and a different social care model. [GMB] demands that government introduces a new standard of care, sufficiently funded and resourced, so that our elderly and vulnerable are cared for with dignity and respect, and in safety.

The 753 care homes run by Southern Cross are not factories that are failing from lack of demand, but are an essential part of every community which now face ruin due to the toxic combination of privatisation and private equity greed.

Lenin the dreamer

Paul Hampton reviews *Lenin (Critical Lives)* by Lars T Lih (Reaktion Books).

Lars T Lih’s excellent short biography of Lenin is a welcome addition to the serious socialist literature on classical Marxist history. The book’s chief merits are its strongly contextual interpretation of Lenin’s life and its readable style.

Lih comments that most recent studies of Lenin seem to be based on the methodology of “nothing but warts”. We’ve all seen the stereotypical image of Lenin: the bloodthirsty monster of the liberal, anarchist and conservative imagination. Pessimistic, voluntaristic, elitist, conspiratorial. Lenin who like Chernyshevsky’s Rakhmetov was sure to have slept on a bed of nails to toughen himself up. A man fuelled by ambition and desire for supremacy, whose self-assurance was so great that it either repelled people or forced them to submit to him. On this view, Lenin was perpetually “worried about the workers”, hence his alleged conception of an elite, centralised party raised above the masses.

Lih demolishes this view, preferring to understand Lenin as a product of the broad European socialist movement of his time, who had to work out his politics in the terrible conditions of tsarist Russia. The Lenin that emerges is deeply committed to working class self-emancipation and a rightful heir to the revolutionary socialism of Marx and Engels.

VLADIMIR ULYANOV BECOMES LENIN

Lenin was born Vladimir Ulyanov in 1870 in Simbirsk on the Volga river. His early years, are well known.

Vladimir Ulyanov became Lenin after his arrest after agitating among the St Petersburg workers in 1895. He had made his name as an energetic activist (praktik), a “propagandising intellectual” among the “purposive” (class conscious) workers. He was exiled to Siberia for three years.

In exile, Lenin ground out an assessment of Russia, which laid the foundation for his politics for the rest of his life. Behind the dry statistical tables of land ownership and employment “was the creation of new fighters who were both willing and able to wrest political freedom from the grip of the absolutist tsarist government”.

Capitalist development meant that “the exploitation of working people in Russia is everywhere capitalist in nature” and it created new classes out of the Russian people. First and foremost were the urban factory workers, the class leaders who were “the sole and natural representative of Russia’s labouring and exploited population and [therefore] capable of raising the banner of worker emancipation” (*Friends of the People*, 1894). Second there were the rural workers, who would be class followers in Lenin’s scenario. These workers would then lead the peasants and the village poor in the great struggle against tsarism.

HEROIC CLASS LEADERSHIP

Lih argues that the central organising idea of Lenin’s life was heroic class leadership.

This meant two things. First, it meant working class leadership of the Russian revolution. On this view, the industrial, waged working class would be the leader (vozhd) of Russian people (narod) in the revolution against tsarism. Despite the overwhelming majority of the peasants, it was the place given to workers in this scenario that marked out Lenin’s politics.

Second, the romantic idea of leadership within the working class, whereby Lenin sought to inspire the rank and file activist with an exalted idea of what their own leadership could accomplish. Together, this party-led, class movement encompassing the whole people would sweep away tsarism and detonate workers revolution across Europe (and latter the globe.

Lih sums up the heroic scenario in one sentence: “The Russian proletariat carries out its world historic mission by becoming the vozhd of the narod, leading a revolution that overthrows the tsar and institutes political freedom, thus preparing the ground for an eventual proletarian vlast [sovereign power] that will bring about socialism”. As he points out this was actually “Marx’s grand idea”, that “only as vozhd of all the labourers will the working class achieve victory”.

Lih argues forcefully in this book and elsewhere that Lenin was largely applying the strategy of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) to Russian conditions. He took the writings of the SPD’s principal theorist Karl Kautsky as his textbook.

The SPD strategy of party-led class leadership was applied to Russia in the following way: “In the first episode the Social Democratic party is founded and becomes accepted as leader of the proletariat. This episode is summarised by Kautsky’s foundational formula about ‘the

merger of socialism and the worker movement’. In the central episode the proletariat leads the narod in a crusade to overthrow the tsar, ‘the shame and curse of Russia’.

CLIMAX OF THE DRAMA

“In the final episode party and proletariat move toward the climax of the drama, socialist revolution itself”. Lenin’s heroic scenario was not unique to him, but reflected much more widely held socialist viewpoints at the time.

Lih has shown in his book *Lenin Rediscovered* that Lenin’s drive for an all-Russian newspaper and an organised, professional, “conspiratorial” apparatus to distribute it was effectively applying the lessons of German social democracy during its own period of illegality. Lenin’s ideas on konspiratsiia (the art of not getting arrested) and professional revolutionaries (i.e. a specialised, skilled worker in an efficient organisation) was about making Social Democratic agitation effective in conditions of repression. Lih regards this — again rightly — as entirely consistent with the heroic scenario of working class leadership and self-emancipation..

Lenin comes out of this interpretation as an incorrigible optimist about working-class organisation. He believed that the workers were eager to fight and continually outstripping the capacity of the Social Democrats to provide the requisite knowledge and organisation. He is admonishing the revolutionaries, urging them to rise to the task and providing the means of the newspaper to create the scaffolding for a genuine workers party. This is not substitutionism or socialism from above. It is about building a workers’ movement under conditions of illegality. The perspective was vindicated by the role workers played in the 1905 revolution and the way the Social Democrats adapted their organisational forms in the short period of freedom that the revolution entailed.

DOG DAYS AND 1917

Lih does not dwell too heavily on the period of skloki [1905-1917] — “the insupportably petty and demeaning infighting that sucked up the time and energy of the émigrés”.

Lih does not believe the common story that the shock of betrayal in 1914 caused Lenin to reject much of what he had previously considered Marxist orthodoxy. “Lenin presented himself not as a bold innovator or a fearless rethinker but as someone faithful to the old verities. His ferocious anger with socialist leaders was because they had reneged on their own word.”

Lenin’s heroic scenario was played out after some modifications in 1917. The Bolsheviks insisted that “the nature of the class that holds the vlast [the sovereign power] decides everything” — and they meant everything.

Lih suggests that in 1917 the socialist revolution was justified by the fact that a substantial majority of the workers in St Petersburg and Moscow (and other cities) wanted to take power.

Yet Lih does not shy away from the difficulties of the regime created after the October revolution under the pressure of civil war. He states that the paradox of Lenin is that

a central commitment of the heroic scenario was to political freedom, yet he founded a regime in which many freedoms of speech, assembly, association etc. were “conspicuously absent”.

Lih also tackles another myth — that among the Bolsheviks in 1920 there was some sort of mass hallucination that Russia was on the eve of full communism. Instead he argues that Lenin and others began the painful process of rethinking because things really were not turning out as they thought they would (in particular the absence of European revolutions on which their scenario depended). In the vivid phrase of eyewitness Arthur Ransome, the Bolsheviks had “illusion after illusion scraped from them by the pumice-stone of experience”.

Lenin by this time was a very sick man. He had been shot and wounded in August 1918. His health deteriorated from overwork and he suffered from nerves, headaches and insomnia. He believed revolutionaries burned out by around the age of fifty and apparently asked Stalin for cyanide pills after his first stroke in 1922.

In his final articles, he sought with the assistance of others such as Trotsky to work out a way for the battered, broken, degenerated workers’ state to hold out.

Lih is clear about the “radical discontinuity” between Lenin and what came next under Stalin.

THE FIGHT FOR CLARITY

For Lih, and he is right about this, “the real essence of Bolshevism was inspired and inspiring class leadership”. From this Lenin’s actions in politics followed.

Lenin was above all devoted to working class self-emancipation. His writing was dedicated to understanding the conditions under which such self-emancipation was possible. This fight for clarity in socialist aims and methods was captured by Olgin in 1919: “Lenin does not reply to an opponent. He vivisects him... He notices every flaw in the line of argument he disagrees with, and he draws the most absurd conclusions from, premises unacceptable to him. At the same time he is derisive. He ridicules his opponent. He castigates him. He makes you feel that his victim is an ignoramus, a fool, a presumptuous nonentity. You are swept by the power of his logic. You are overwhelmed by his intellectual passion”.

Hence Lenin’s ferocity in debate. For Lenin, a philistine was anyone who failed to share his exalted sense of historical events and the overriding importance of working class leadership. .

Lenin is ours. The Lenin who understood the potential of the working class. The Lenin who sought inspired class leadership of the whole people, both in Russia and internationally. The Lenin who developed worker-cadres who could work miracles in leading their sisters and brothers. The Lenin who fought for clarity against the philistines who attacked or undermined the class emancipatory project.

The great virtue of Lih’s book is that we see Lenin in this light. Lenin is an inspiration for those who share his dreams and fight the latter-day philistines.

• Abridged. Full text here:
www.workersliberty.org/node/16761

Teaching children to fail

Education in England is more unequal than elsewhere. Students who do well in English schools, do well by international standards. Students who do badly in English schools, do very badly by international standards.

A recent OECD report* (February 2011) confirmed this: “Schooling outcomes in the United Kingdom are among the more unequal in the OECD area” [i.e. among the world’s better-off countries].

Within the general inequality, poor white students suffer worst of all.

White students from among the poorest fifth get an average of one fewer good GCSE pass than black or Asian students in the poorest fifth, even though English is a second language for many of those black or Asian students.

A teacher from a school in Northern England dominated by poor white working-class kids looks at the reasons why.

POOR

In my experience, it is those white working-class boys — from the poorest layers of the working class — who are doing worst in educational terms.

It is important to recognise, though, that the differences are marginal; a lot of working-class boys from Pakistani backgrounds are only doing marginally better than white working-class boys. The common factor is obviously that they’re poor.

There are a lot of factors behind this; it’s to do with poverty, housing and aspirations. Invariably you’ll find that the parents of these children have had similar problems — lack of support in education leading to poor literacy skills, poverty, mental health problems or health problems generally. This all culminates in these children being more disadvantaged.

The basics for those children are missing from a very early age; they’re often already 18 months behind other children at the point at which they start school. Those are ingrained social problems brought about by poverty, poor housing and poor access to services. In a lot of cases all this can lead to problems with depression and addiction, so these children are getting stuck in a very chaotic cycle.

HOUSING

A lot of elements in this picture can be traced back to the creation of a significant “pauper” layer within the working class — an underclass, almost — during the Thatcher years.

For people who couldn’t afford to buy their own council house in that period, the housing they’ve got access to has become poorer and poorer. If you walk around estates you can tell which houses have been privately bought and maintained and which are still owned by the council. On top of that there’s the general lack of council housing; a lot of our students live in privately-rented accommodation but move around from place to place often.

You can see the effects of what Thatcher did in other problems our children have. A lot of the kids we work with have quite severe dental problems; one child in particular is having problems because one of her parents didn’t turn up for an appointment so she’s been struck off the NHS list, so we’ve had to try and find her a dentist that will see her. Pre-



Thatcher, that would’ve been fairly straightforward. We might even have had a dentist who came into school. But we don’t have access to those sort of services any more.

Another factor in all of this is the way the education system is structured, and particularly in its intense focus on an endless series of exams.

There’s been a shift towards telling students they’re “failures” if they don’t get five A-C grades at GCSE, but actually it’s not the end of the world if you don’t get those grades. There are things you can go on to do. That self-image as a “failure” compounds the whole situation.

From the time when they take their SATS in year 2, they’re pigeonholed into categories — the high-flyers, the average ones, and the failures. They know that, and those expectations stay with them.

We’re obsessed with assessing children from the moment they start formal education. That’s not good for boys, especially, because their fine motor skills develop slowly. They often find writing very difficult and just give up.

In countries like Sweden or Denmark where they start formal education later, children often do better.

The intense setting and streaming now common in many English schools is also an issue. Different sets will study almost entirely different curricula; you’ll be told “you’re in this stream and these are your options.”

PIGEONHOLED

So just from data created by assessments, children will be pigeonholed. It doesn’t allow for people who might develop later or at a different pace.

The disappearance of mixed-ability teaching has created social problems for children at school. It’s entrenched them in relationships with people who are suffering from all the same problems as them, repeatedly being told that they’re failures, and that can make their friendship groups incredibly cliquey. It’s mainly the New Labour governments, rather than the Tories, who’re responsible for creating that situation.

Teachers are trained to relate to their classes on the basis of the assessment level the kids are at, rather than looking at them as individuals. Teachers will say “I’ve got a lot of Bs and Cs in this class”, rather than seeing the children as people. Every teacher has a constant running tally drummed into them of what level the kids were at.

We’re constantly aware of the threat of imposed academy status or special measures; they’re punitive measures taken against schools if they don’t meet these rigid targets, which apply to all schools regardless of the social factors at play in the community that school serves. That’s the govern-

ment’s idea of “improvement”.

They need to look at the communities our schools are serve and improve things there, rather than putting this incessant pressure on one group of public sector workers.

Some schools are starting to develop a more sophisticated approach to behaviour management — looking at contextual factors and so on — but there is still a problem of a culture of negative punishments as the default response to bad behaviour. Of course you need general rules that apply to all students, but particularly for children with long-term behavioural issues you need to look deeper into what’s going on there, and look at children as individuals.

There’s no one thing which will rectify the situation, but one change that would have a massive impact on teachers and children alike is smaller class sizes. Wherever you limit class size, there are also big improvements in how teachers view their jobs and in how teachers achieve.

• OECD report:
www.oecd.org/dataoecd/50/37/47319830.pdf

Finland

Finland consistently has the best results among the world’s richer countries for numeracy and literacy in its schools.

It is best because lower-achieving students in Finland do much better than lower-achieving students in countries like Britain, while higher-achieving students do just as well.

An article in *The Independent* (26 May) described how: “It is illegal to charge fees in the Finnish education system, so even those schools that are run privately take their funding from the state. Its schools are comprehensive in that there is no selection of pupils.

“They are less formal and more relaxed than schools in the UK... The teachers are not beset by targets, in fear of inspections or how well their schools do in league tables. There are simply no league tables or inspections... [or] national testing...

“Class sizes are smaller than in the UK... They are also mixed ability... If pupils fall behind, a second teacher can be sent in to help them to catch up.

“Of course, it may help that Finland as a country does not have the vast gap in household incomes of the UK...”

Oppose plans for a private university in London!

A cartel of academics, including A.C. Grayling, Richard Dawkins and Niall Ferguson, has announced plans to build a new private Higher Education institution, the “New College of Arts and Humanities”, based in Bloomsbury in central London. It will charge students £18 thousand a year.

- A campaign has been set up to oppose this step towards privatising the University of London: see the Facebook group: “Stop the New College of the Humanities and HE privatisation”.
- For a report of the campaign’s founding meeting and more details of how the New College will function, see lattelabour.blogspot.com/2011/06/greylist-grayling.html
- For correspondence between Grayling and ULU Vice-President Sean Rillo Raczka, see the NCAFC website www.anticuts.com

The politics of SlutWalk

By Esther Townsend and Cathy Nugent

The SlutWalk story is now ubiquitous. In a January “campus safety information session” at Toronto’s York University, police officer Michael Sanguinetti told women to “avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimised”.

Shocking? Yes. Unusual? No. Blaming the person who experiences sexual violence, rather than the perpetrator is a common reaction of both the police and wider society. Rape Crisis England and Wales suggests that 40% of adults who are raped tell no one, and 31% of children who are sexually abused reach adulthood without having told anyone — precisely because they are afraid of blamed and made to feel guilt and shame.

It is routine for sexual violence to be placed within the context of men’s response to women’s actions, and the idea that men “just can’t help themselves”. Rape is not the product of sexual attraction, a person’s dress sense or behaviour — it is a form of violence; a way to demonstrate power over another person. Yet responses to sexual violence which place responsibility on women to avoid “risky situations”, such as having the temerity to walk home alone or drink alcohol, are widespread, even amongst people who would condemn Sanguinetti’s remarks.

What is unusual about Sanguinetti’s remarks is that they have sparked protests worldwide. York University was

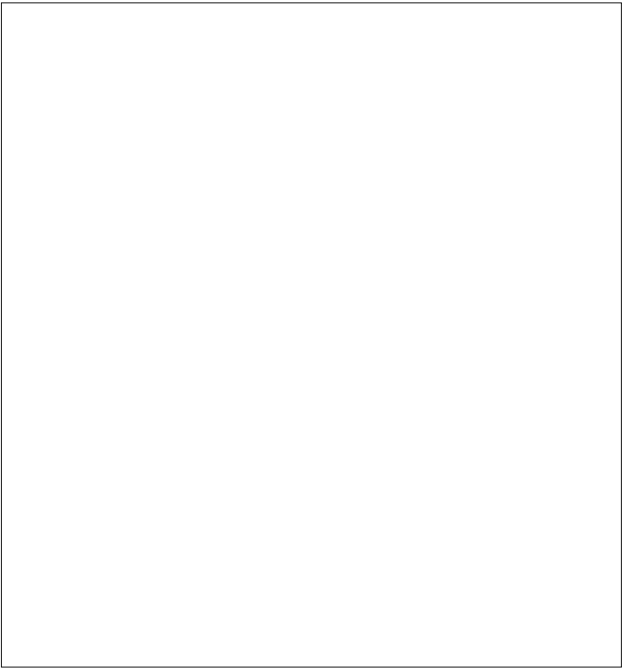
quick to ask for a formal apology from Toronto police, but a group of young women felt that this was not adequate. They wanted to “speak to the bigger picture of common, persistent and documented victim-blaming within...Police Services. [...]to demand accountability, not apologies”.

Aiming to “make a unified statement about sexual assault and victims’ rights and to demand respect for all” they organised a protest march — “Slutwalk” — calling on people of all genders and ages to “Come walk or roll or strut or holler or stomp with us”.

Toronto Slutwalk on 3 April attracted three or four thousand people and since then “satellite” marches have taken place across Canada, the USA, Australia, the Netherlands, Brazil, New Zealand, South Africa and Mexico. Seattle reported over 5,000 “slutwalkers”. Rallies typically end with speakers and workshops on stopping sexual violence and ending blame culture. In the UK Slutwalks are planned for Manchester, London, Edinburgh, Bristol, Newcastle, Birmingham and Cardiff. Toronto organisers are already planning the return of Slutwalk next April.

Despite the clear underlying political message of the protests, Slutwalk has provoked a variety of responses; it has not been a “unifying” protest. Discussion across the media and internet has ranged over women’s sexuality and the objectification and violence that women experience. In London discussion groups have been organised by Feminist Fightback and the Feminist Library.

Some have found the “slut pride” signposting freeing and



empowering, others just plain offensive. Critics have said the word slut cannot be “re-appropriated” because it is the language of “patriarchy”.

For that reason SlutWalk’s been labelled un-feminist or post-feminist — indeed some organisers (but by no means all) have said they are not feminist!

Others have charged that the protest could exclude black and working-class women who are most vulnerable to domestic and sexual violence.

It is worth looking at some of these arguments in detail.

The fact that some women find the word alienating is not difficult to explain. It is an insulting word with a long history. The meaning of “slut” thirty or forty years ago was more to do with the kind of woman who doesn’t care too much for housework (hurrah). It is now used in the street with varying degrees of aggressiveness but also (usually) to demean women in more personal contexts, perhaps synonymously with phrases like “prick tease”.

But why do some do not want to “play along” with a subversive use of the word?

Some have said that trying to “reclaim” the word “slut” represents a white middle-class point of view and that is alienating to women who have to live with being constantly presumed to be sexually promiscuous as working class and black women may be.

But perhaps this is presumptuous of the critics. Wouldn’t any woman who has been on the receiving end of sexual violence or harassment (and that’s a great many women) be provoked into anger by the casual use of the word slut by the police? And these SlutWalks have surely been angry.

Some have objected to ironic wordplay precisely because it is “having fun”, demeaning the seriousness of the underlying message.

One criticism is that SlutWalk invites women participating to dress up as sluts. Some feminists are dismayed by another dress code which emphasises how women dress. Isn’t this just putting more pressure on women to conform to stereotypes?

But even the original Toronto march didn’t specify anything had to be worn, saying “you don’t have to wear your sexual proclivities on your sleeve, we just ask that you come”. Although for some dressing up is part of it, it has never been at all compulsory or anything like it from the start. That idea seems to us to have come mainly from the media liking to put photos of young women in their underwear in the papers. (And where are the photos of older women in their underwear? There must have been a few...)

Moreover some Slutwalks, e.g. Manchester, have gone to great lengths to say “come as you are”, dress as you want.

There is a lot to be said for trying to subvert the idea of “sexiness”. It has feminist history. Back in the 1990s some feminists, in a reaction against those who wanted to ban pornography, tried to think about alternative representations of female sexuality.

Those efforts are a long way from the superficially reasonable and bland attempt by Counterfire to organise a “Hi-jabs, Hoodies and Hotpants” contingent on the London march. It is one thing to endorse a liberal notion of personal

From Tunis to London, the workers’ agenda

Ideas for Freedom is the annual weekend of socialist discussion and debate hosted by Workers’ Liberty. IFF 2011 takes place on 8-10 July at Highgate Newtown Community Centre, 25 Bertram Street, London N19 5DQ.

For a timetable, more details and to book tickets online see www.workersliberty.org/ideas Email awl@workersliberty.org, or ring 07796 690 874

Friday 8 July

Showing and discussion of Eisenstein’s film *Strike*
7-11pm @ the Exmouth Arms, 1 Starcross Street, London NW1 2HR

Sessions on Saturday 9 July include:

- Eyewitness report from Benghazi by Libyan activist Huda Abuzeid
- The fight for a workers’ government, with Sean Matgamna and Jill Mountford
- Chavs: the demonisation of the working class, with Owen Jones
- The working class in the North African and Middle Eastern revolutions, with speakers from Morocco, Tunisia and Iraq
- Introduction to Marxism sessions including: Who was Lenin?, Are socialists multiculturalists? and debate on Marxism and anarchism
- Race, class and sexuality on film: showing of *Pictures of Zain* and *What You Looking At?*, and talk led by director Faryal Velmi



Faryal Velmi making Pictures of Zain

Sessions on Sunday 10 July include



Dublin protest

- Should we be saying “General strike”? Debate with Workers Power
- Introduction to Marxism and feminism
- School students’ struggles in 2003 and 2010
- How can Labour councillors fight cuts? Poplar, the GLC and today, with Janine Booth, John McDonnell and anti-cuts Labour councillors
- The 1880s and 90s: Marxists and the rise of “New Unionism”
- The Eurozone crisis and workers’ struggle across Europe, with John Grahl

Tickets bought before the end of June are £20 waged, £12 low-waged/students, £7 unwaged/school students (one day £11, £7, £5).

choice, quite another to endorse a dress code — the hijab — which is, as part of a global religious system, about *repressing* women’s sexuality! In many countries where women “choose” not to wear it they risk harassment and worse.

Does the fact that sexist media shits (Rod Liddle) have had a good chortle at the potential “sluttishness” on display show that SlutWalk has failed to think through its tactics? Let’s hope he’ll get enough men angry enough turn up to demonstrate, as they have done in many places.

Saying “I will demonstrate exactly how I want” is a great part of the message. But if you want to build a big movement, if you want to have a real impact on some of those appalling facts about sexual violence you have to think tactically. If SlutWalk is badly misinterpreted in a press it can’t control and therefore reacted against by people you want on your side, perhaps they should think again.

In truth “slut” is a word that is loaded with different meanings and therefore was always going to *feel* different to different women. It was always going to be more difficult to reclaim or subvert than, for example, the word “queer”.

But this has been a young woman’s “movement” organised by people who (fortunately) do not have the kind of political baggage of liberal/radical feminists who organise Reclaim the Night marches in London. That’s a demonstration that does not welcome sex workers who want to organise to improve their conditions of work and excludes transgender people. SlutWalk is much better in that respect.

This generation of young women are pressurised from an early age to dress as if stereotypically sexually available, to “perform” well at “being sexy” in a grotesquely unrealistic way. And yet they are slapped down and not expected to actually enjoy sex. Furthermore the really negative side of young women’s experience (as opposed having consensual sex) — that of sexual and domestic violence — is simply not talked about.

Here are young women saying yes, they enjoy having consensual sex but no, they will not put up with anything else. And good for them!

Older feminists and the sceptical should go with the flow, see this as the start of something new, as something to be supported and, where necessary, *constructively* criticised. It is up to more experienced activists to fill in any political gaps.

For instance we need campaigns to defend and extend women’s services which have been so badly affected by the cuts. We need to make sure that the right-wing in the Tory party and beyond do not get their way on such things as sex education. We need to campaign for those things that help give all women, of all ages and all backgrounds the freedom they want.

• slutwalklondon.tumblr.com

Sex in the Big Society

By Louise Gold

Contrary to popular belief, the schools of Eton and St Paul’s, where members of our current Tory cabinet acquired their top-notch educations, were not rife with fagging, or even shagging. In fact, the whole Conservative lot, Nadine Dorries and Anne Milton included, abstained from sex entirely until they were well settled within the confines of marriage.

Once there, they performed the ritual act a mere two or three times, to ensure children were conceived, and contraceptives (which they were happy to learn nothing about) were not used. But how, you’re almost certainly asking yourselves, do they manage to practice such serene and joyful restraint?

Luckily it is not only our blessed ruling class that might have opportunity to hone the skill/state of being without a sex drive unless death-do-us-part.

If Dorries and Milton get their way, it could mean the whole country are deprived of their lesson in unfurling a condom over an erect vegetable, for fear it might disrupt the path to a virtuous Britain: where family is first, husbands, their wives and 2.4 children foremost. This is the message apparent in the current Conservative agenda on both abortion and sex education. Well, not specifically the bit about the cucumber.

The most recent attacks on a woman’s right to choose and a young person’s right to a sexual education come manifold.

Firstly, Anne Milton, the public Health Minister, invited the organisation Life to take a place at the table on a new sexual health forum, set up to replace the Independent Advi-

sory Group on Sexual Health and HIV. Life was also party to the parliamentary launch of the Sex and Relationships Council, which was endorsed by the education secretary, Michael Gove.

Life is an anti-abortion charity, which stands firmly in opposition to what is the present law regarding abortion rights, as well as being critical of current sex-education surrounding the use of condoms. They have an “absolutist” position, stating that “The most important and influential part of Life’s ethos is our opposition to all abortion on principle” and advocate abstinence education instead. The founders of Life are Catholic, although the organisation claims to have no religious affiliations.

Secondly, the inclusion of Life has meant the exclusion of the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) from the new forum, despite its long-term membership of the previous advisory group.

Clare Murphy, who works for BPAS, described the changes as replicating the softly, softly approach of the American pro-life lobbyists. “MPs, including Nadine Dorries and Frank Field, argue that women considering abortion should receive counselling from an organisation not itself involved in terminations. The BPAS, they say, has a vested interest in withholding information from women and pushing them into procedures they do not really want... The MPs’ intention is pernicious, deliberately seeking to undermine women’s confidence in their own decision-making and their trust in the organisations that offer support and services.”

The third tier to this escalation of the pro-life campaign is the call for abstinence education itself. But don’t worry, unless you fall into the very specific category of women aged 13-16, you won’t need it. If you are suddenly worried, it’s be-

cause you are taking on the responsibility of just saying no... to sex, initially, but that will set you up nicely for the choice that will inevitably follow because you haven’t been given access to education that includes contraception. MPs voted 67 to 61, a majority of six, to let Dorries bring forward her bill. It will receive its second reading in January.

Lastly, Dorries has also tabled amendments to the Health and Social Care bill to tighten the rules on terminations. Murphy suggests that “The beneficiaries of their proposed amendments to the Health and Social Care Bill are likely to be the crisis pregnancy centres to which we know some GPs are already diverting women who are considering abortion... CareConfidential is supported by Care, a Christian organisation committed to the preservation of life from fertilisation.”

Sex in the Big Society is clearly going to mean this kind of fractured provision, where Christian organisations deliver and advise on what should be free and easily accessible services, hard won despite the church.

Fundamentally, women must of course consent to what happens to their own bodies, whether that is engaging in sexual intercourse or carrying out a pregnancy to term. It is not for the government to insidiously teach a sex negative view, while advocating archaic family values that are out of touch with how many men and women can or want to live.

And come on, 13-16 year olds being told not to fuck? We were *all* doing it by then: badly, with all sorts of spotty bed fellows and at all kinds of terrible house parties when our parents were away, but nothing, nobody would’ve stopped us. So, let’s keep teaching how to correctly unroll a rubber over a wizened carrot, please.

No primary school academy in Lewisham!

Leila Galloway from “Deptford Says No to Tidemill Academy” spoke to Duncan Morrison.

My parents are both educationalists and I work as a senior lecturer in higher education. I have been doing a post-graduate course in Philosophy at Middlesex University and was involved in the campaign to stop the closure of the Philosophy department there. I have two daughters — eight and eleven years old — at Tidemill.

I think it is morally wrong to privatise education and a huge social experiment. What we see now is the increasing commodification of education.

When Mark Elms, the head of Tidemill, had been discussing becoming a community school, a couple of years ago, I was quite interested in that idea, and I had discussed community education and shared good practice from the Reggio Emilia approach to primary education in Italy. I can see now that he didn’t have the same vision.

Last summer all the parents received a letter saying that the school was going for academy status, that they were going to consult over the summer holidays and then there

would be a one hour meeting to get parents’ views. It was a total kick in the teeth.

The first thing I did was phoned the Anti-Academies Alliance; with their help I got a leaflet and handed it out at the gate. I spent the whole of the summer writing letters to the school, the council and to Joan Ruddock (the local MP). We launched a petition which in the end got nearly 800 signatures including 147 from parents of children at the school; we created a website and started tweeting.

We organised a meeting in the summer and invited Mark Elms and the Chair of the Governors, Keith Geary. Mark Elms took down the posters for the meeting and actively encouraged parents not to attend. We organised stalls every Wednesday and Saturday and leafleted all the time. I also had a meeting with Joan Ruddock and asked a question at council question time. Joan Ruddock asked the school to organise a proper consultation meeting and the council confirmed that it was necessary for the school to run a full consultation. The council hadn’t even been aware of the schools decision to go for academy status prior to the letter going to parents.

When the school held their first meeting at the end of the summer, I asked a question and Elms just went for me. Everyone said, “Why is he so angry with you?” It reflected badly on him and made people wonder why he was so aggressive. He offered very thin stuff. He talked about “freedom for creative curriculum” but actually this just meant administrative freedom such as to move the term dates, nothing relating to what our children were being taught. He kept talking about the “ready-reckoner”, of the money per child that the school would receive. Money seemed to be the only clear explanation given and I saw no educational benefit to my children. However, it turned out that he got his sums wrong.

The Senior Leadership team then wrote a letter to

every parent in the school denouncing the anti-academies campaign and trying to make out it was an outside campaign. Whereas it was a very well supported parent and local campaign.

The governors at their December meeting voted to go for academy status. Throughout the process I had insisted on getting everything in writing. We made a legal challenge. The solicitor’s main objections were:

“1. The school failed to comply with its public sector equality duties: a legal binding requirement.

“2. The decision was taken on the basis of, and having considered, misleading and /or incorrect financial information and /or without proper steps being taken to obtain the information that was required properly to inform the decision. One glaring example was that the school estimated it would cost them £60,000 to pay for additional services normally provided by the LEA when in fact the DfE’s estimate was £78,000 and the LEA estimated the figure to be in excess of £229,000.

“3. The decision was taken in the light of a consultation process in which the information presented to consultees was mislead-

ing or incorrect.

“4. The decision was taken on a misunderstanding as to the basis on which parental views had been obtained.”

We never received any response from the school to these four points. The school however withdrew its application on 21 January 2011.

There had been a space on the parent governors since September and we finally forced them to hold an election in April. Paulo Sanhueza won on an anti-academy platform.

Despite it all on 4 May the governors again voted to convert to an academy. We are currently hopefully that Joan Ruddock will write to Michael Gove to ask for him not to sign-off on the application (due soon).

Our situation in the campaign has been helped because last year’s furore in the national press about Mark Elms’s salary, which was larger than the Prime Ministers. The issue of the salary meant a lot of local people were interested in discussing what was happening at the school and open to supporting the campaign. The school is also due to move in to the new “Deptford Lounge” buildings, which are council buildings; many people felt why should the school

get our buildings if they want to go off on their own.

The Labour Council and MP have both been supportive of the campaign in the end, it took them a little while to get behind it. Initially, in the aftermath of Labour’s defeat in the General Election, it didn’t seem as though they knew what their policy was, having previously supported academies..

The campaign has been a success in that it has informed the parents and mobilised the local community and I suspect it has made other schools in Lewisham and Deptford, and maybe beyond, think twice about applying for academy status.

I would like to have involved more parents from the off but we were hampered by the campaign starting over the summer holidays. We would like to have got more support from the teachers in the school but they are mainly young teachers, fearful for their jobs and unwilling to put their heads over the parapet. But Lewisham NUT has been very supportive throughout the campaign.

• Support the campaign by going to sayingno.org/cms and making a donation.

Rawmarsh: a guide to how strikes can win

By a Rotherham teacher

What do you do if your employers — citing dubious financial difficulties — proposes to sack 25 members of staff (out of 81)?

Simple: you do as National Union of Teachers (NUT) members at Rawmarsh Community School did: organise for discontinuous industrial action, recruiting teachers from other unions as you go.

After every period of strike action management retreated further and further, and members’ confidence grew. There are important lessons the labour movement should learn from Rawmarsh on how to fight the job cuts to come. So here is your four step plan to winning against job losses — Rawmarsh style!

STEP ONE

Respond actively. Organise.

At Rawmarsh School the story was simple. The NUT immediately called a members’ meeting, gave the case for industrial action and balloted. Meanwhile another union, the NASUWT, blathered on about negotiations, and did not even ballot let alone take industrial action and crossed the picket lines.

Yet it had the cheek to claim recently that they had won jobs for all their members without industrial action. Well, when eight of their members leave to join the NUT that made the job a hell of a lot easier! Job losses cannot be negotiated away without the threat of strike action.

The NUT also put in place full strike pay for all members in the dispute. This was absolutely vital in enabling members to take the action they wanted to take, until the point of winning.

STEP TWO

Don’t call off strike action for concessions. Escalate as necessary.

After the initial nine days of strike action, school management started to sound the retreat. First, they signifi-

cantly scaled back the number of compulsory redundancies, then announced there would be no job cuts until the following September (initially they were proposed to happen in the middle of the school year!). However the NUT did not call off strike action at this point to negotiate the rest. In response to further days of strike action, the number of NUT members threatened with redundancy steadily dwindled.

Throughout this the union never once called off the action. At times strike dates were put on hold until after meetings with management, but the threat was ever present — management could feel the members breathing down their necks at every moment of negotiation!

Finally one NUT member was left, who “happened” to be the school rep. NUT members were in no mood for this kind of union bashing. They voted unanimously to continue action! At this point, a further two days of action before a negotiation meeting yielded no results. So the NUT group moved to three days a week until management relented, which they very quickly did.

STEP THREE

Solidarity.

When only the NUT rep was left facing the sack another member was heard to say — “we are not about to abandon Ralph [the rep] to sink when he held the life boats for the rest of us to get in”. This sort of solidarity characterised the strike at Rawmarsh.

The fact the five members of the NASUWT joined the strike, the fact that all members of the NUT group stayed out until the end, and the overwhelming level of support from the local and national labour movement helped win this dispute. If members at the school had been told a year ago what lengths they would go to in order to protect their rep’s job, many would not have believed it. They learnt through struggle the power that the union has when it organises.

One very important thing contributed to this learning curve for the members — the fact that the union involved them in the dispute. All decisions on negotiation, strike

dates, tactics for picket lines and communication with the wider labour movement were put to the NUT group at the school at regular meetings. This meant that when the rep and the division secretary took them the news of management not backing down on Ralph’s job, members were ready to take the decision to vote to continue action.

It is vital if we are to win against job cuts that we build union branches capable of this sort of organising. Capable of conducting disputes locally and accountably. Capable of forming strike committees at school and division level.

STEP FOUR

Insist all job losses are unacceptable.

The proposed job losses at Rawmarsh would have had a significant effect on education at the school, class sizes would have risen, less popular subjects lost, and a wealth of teaching experience not replaced.

Job losses aren’t inevitable, they are the product of a government determined to beat down union organisation, cut costs for the rich and create a two tier education system. At Rawmarsh, members did not stop when the majority of members had kept their jobs. They kept up the struggle, going on the offensive to say that no job cuts are acceptable.

RESULT

There are now no NUT members at Rawmarsh facing compulsory redundancy, and time was found to give the NUT rep his job.

Unfortunately there are still some job losses, non-union members, or members of unions that did not fight. NUT members have also taken some voluntary redundancies and voluntary reductions in hours. However the turn around from 25 teaching job losses six months ago to next to none now is a serious victory for workers.

This is not just a victory for those at Rawmarsh either, it is a piece of education for the labour movement as a whole; fight and you can win. Strike to win, involve the members and build solidarity.

Vince Cable not welcome at GMB congress

By a delegate

A speech by Lib Dem Business Secretary Vince Cable to the GMB union congress (5-9 June), was punctuated by boos, heckling and cat-calls.

Later, the congress resolved to organise, and campaign for a yes vote in, a ballot of its public sector members for industrial action on pensions: not in time for 30 June, but maybe in the autumn.

Cable had trailed the possibility of further anti-trade union legislation. Two delegates displayed a banner reading “Vince Cable – not welcome. Stop attacking workers’ rights”. This is not a mass rank-and-file revolt, but it is not insignificant. The culture of the GMB is one of unquestioning deference to the leadership and it is encouraging that delegates were not prepared to give Cable the respectful, if frosty, reception that union leaders

Mary Turner and Paul Kenny had wanted.

Cable, understated but impossible to misinterpret, said that while strikes remained at “historically low levels”, the case for new legislation to restrict unions’ ability to take action was “not compelling”. But if mass strikes “impose serious damage to our economic and social fabric”, Cable said, then the government may have to act. He did not mention any specific legislative steps he might advocate, but delegates could easily join the dots between Cable’s thinly-veiled threats and recent attempts by Tory MP Dominic Raab and London mayor Boris Johnson to push for changes to the law that would require a majority of all those eligible to vote, rather than of those voting, to endorse strike action before it could be legally sanctioned.

The picture painted in Cable’s speech was extremely clear for congress

delegates — an anti-worker government pushing through savage cuts and attempting to shackle the only real obstacle to that project: organised labour. The congress also passed policy endorsing John McDonnell’s Lawful Industrial Action (Minor Errors) bill.

LABOUR

In a small-scale but encouraging departure from the GMB’s overly-forgiving attitude to the crimes of Labour MPs, it also resolved to investigate withdrawing union sponsorship from any Labour MP who failed to vote in favour of such policy in future.

The general attitude from delegates towards the possibility of strike action was positive. When Cable mentioned the June 30 strikes, loud cheering ensued even though the GMB is not participating. But despite this enthusiasm, and even while the congress hosted



fringe meetings describing the government’s pensions reform as “the end of the world”, the fact remains that GMB is still the “no-strike” union in many public sector and local authority workplaces. In a fringe meeting on pensions, national officer Naomi Cooke defended the GMB’s decision not to participate in the June 30 strikes by arguing that the union was still in negotiations and consultation over pensions reform, and that it was inappropriate to take action until the results of those negotiations were clear.

The conservatism may be shifting, however. Despite its contradictions, GMB remains a union with potential. Its über-general, “anyone-can-join” approach makes it slightly more permeable than, say,

Unison, and unlike most other big unions it has expressed at least a notional interest in learning the lessons of Unite New Zealand’s “Supersize My Pay” campaign and taking on the retail and service sector employers where young, non-unionised workers are concentrated.

Speaking at a GMB Southern Regional Equalities Forum fringe meeting, Workers’ Liberty member Daniel Randall said that to survive, the union would have to recapture the spirit of its founder, Will Thorne, and build a “New Unionism for the 21st century”.

Giving its members clear advice on how to avoid being used to undermine the June 30 strikes, particularly in schools, and balloting members for national strike action sooner rather than later would be a wel-

come beginning.

Just down the road from the congress centre, on its second day of business, GMB members working for Brighton City Council held unofficial strike action over the refusal of their management to pay overtime pay for extra work they were undertaking, voluntarily, to clear a Bank Holiday backlog. The union is now balloting. Unfortunately, aside from an article on the strike from local paper the *Argus* being posted on the press board, the action found no echo inside congress of the workers’ own union.

But it is precisely actions like this upon which the GMB will need to build if it is to participate meaningfully in the building of a working-class counter-offensive against the ConDem cuts.

UCU and anti-semitism

By Camila Bassi, Sheffield Hallam UCU (pc)

The Congress this year of the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU), on 28-30 May, carried a motion put forward by its national executive committee:

“Congress notes with concern that the so-called ‘EUMC working definition of antisemitism’, while not adopted by the EU or the UK government and having no official status, is being used by bodies such as the NUS and local student unions in relation to activities on campus. Congress believes that the EUMC definition confuses criticism of Israeli government policy and actions with genuine antisemitism, and is being used to silence debate about Israel and Palestine on campus.”

For sure, the right wing in Israel and their supporters outside will levy the charge of anti-semitism to silence criticism of the crimes of the Israeli state and military against the Palestinian Arabs.

Such tactics are also aimed against supporters of Israeli anti-occupation movements, such as Gush Shalom, depicting “self-haters” and “traitors” to justify Israeli expansionism. But what is the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia

(EUMC) working definition?

“Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”

Examples are given of what is anti-semitic:

“Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as collective — such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions.”

EXCEPTION

There is quite crucially an exception recognised by the EUMC, stated as follows:

“However, criticism of Israel similar to that leveled against any other country cannot be regarded as anti-semitic.”

The carried UCU motion sets in process:

1. That UCU will make no use of the EUMC definition (e.g. in educating members or dealing with internal complaints);

2. That UCU will dissociate itself from the EUMC definition in any public dis-

cussion on the matter in which is involved;

3. That UCU will campaign for open debate on campus concerning Israel’s past history and current policy, while continuing to combat all forms of racial or religious discrimination.

The conclusion? Left-wing anti-semitism — an anti-imperialism of fools — is rife in the union. But let’s be clear what we mean by this. Left-wing anti-semitism does not mean all criticism of the Israeli state and military, and of its expansionist policy and practice. We should fiercely oppose the ongoing brutal suppression of the Palestinian Arabs, and demand the liberation of the post-1967 Occupied Territories on autonomous and continuous territory for an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Criticism of Israel is not anti-semitism. Anti-semitism comes in only with the absolute denial of Israel’s right to exist as a nation-state (because somehow it is worse than any other nation-state in the world) and its crimes are worse than the crimes of any other nation-state in the world.

This very often involves the conflation of the Israeli working class with the Israeli ruling class, and the outright denial to the Israeli people of their own right to national self-determination.

Southampton strikes at “crucial stage”

By Darren Bedford

Monday June 13 will see a high point in ongoing anti-cuts strikes at Southampton City Council.

On that day five sections involved in the rolling action will overlap for a day of coordinated strikes involving street cleaners, parking wardens, refuse collectors, bridge toll collectors and 250 hospital cleaners working for contractor

Medirest at Southampton General.

A joint Unison/Unite march is being held on June 13, starting at 12:30pm at Hoglands Park and marching to the Civic Centre.

Other sections of local authority workers, such as workers in Children’s Social Care, are also maintaining action short of strikes, including not covering vacant posts, non-use of cars and working to contract. Unison sources estimate that the council is having to

spend £40,000 on taxis in the Children’s Contact centre alone.

The council has offered talks at ACAS on June 16, but no date has been fixed.

Unison branch secretary Mike Tucker said, “our dispute is now reaching a crucial stage. We need financial support, support on our picket lines and support at the demonstration on 13 June.”

• For more information, soton-unison-office.org.uk

Sheffield pensions fight

By Sheffield AWL

Members of Unison and Unite (admin workers, cleaners, caterers, porters and security) at Sheffield University were on strike over pensions on 3 June.

Management pushed through changes to their pension scheme at a university senate meeting without considering alternatives. The universities proposals rip the guts out of the pension scheme for its non-teaching staff, many of whom are low paid workers. The current system gives members half their final salary as their pension, but new proposals would leave members with a lot less than that.

Someone who earned £15,000 on retirement could drop from £7,500 on the

current scheme to £3,700 on the new scheme, and pay more in contributions to boot.

The two unions have called another day of strike action on 10 June, as this is the last day that students attend the university: strikers are hopeful they will have an impact on university functioning and bring management back to the table. The unions now need to think of a strategy to win and not lose pace over the summer term, where strike action will have a smaller impact despite workers still working during this period.

As with pensions disputes nationally, action in the summer term must be followed by rolling action and other industrial action, with a stepping up of action come autumn.

Saltend ends

The Saltend workers’ dispute has come to a frustrating end after nearly three months.

The 400 locked-out construction workers failed to win back their jobs at the refinery site in Hull after their employer Redhall Services Ltd was axed by the Vivergo consortium.

Vivergo has improved the payout it was offering workers, and most have now accepted. Certainly, it would not have done that without sustained picketing at the site and other action elsewhere.

But if the dispute had been spread to other sites, the workers may have won more. The national shop stewards’ forum for the engineering construction industry held back from taking that step.

Solidarity & Workers' Liberty

Councils join 30 June strike. Spread the action!

By Darren Bedford

Council workers in Birmingham and Doncaster could join the mass public sector strike action on 30 June, as public sector union Unison announced ballots that could see 15,000 workers take strike action.

Birmingham city council, Europe's largest local authority, the city's biggest single employer and the largest local authority employer in the UK, is planning to make £300 million cuts by 2015, including the axing of 7,000 jobs — nearly 40% of the total workforce.

The council is also outsourcing 100 ICT and call centre jobs to India, as part of a joint venture with private firm Capita.

The cuts involve contractual changes which will abolish extra payments for weekend and out-of-hours working. Workers could also face unilateral relocation without regard to personal circumstances.

Unison's regional organiser Mark New said: "The massive job cuts, the pay freeze and privatisation will leave the council struggling to provide decent services to people in Birmingham."

In Doncaster, the council plans a similar scale of cuts as it looks to save £71 million by 2015. 700 jobs have already been shed and Unison estimates that a further 500 will go in the next 12 months. Warden services for the elderly and home care services have been cut, and the council has a long-term project of library closures.

Doncaster Unison's branch secretary Jim Board said: "Doncaster Council's threat of further redundancies and attacks on the pay and conditions of thousands of mainly low-paid women workers will have a devastating effect on the front-line services our communities rely on."

Alongside the ongoing Unison and Unite strikes in Southampton, which involve an innovative strategy of indefinite rolling strikes, the Birmingham and Doncaster ballot could represent a hugely significant development in workers' fightback against cuts.

Until now, local government unions — most importantly Unison itself, the country's second biggest union and the majority union in the sector — have been reluctant to ballot their members for strike action against cuts, some-

times (as in Tower Hamlets) citing inaccurate membership records (which would potentially render any ballot illegal). They have more often preferred to wait for the process of budget-setting and negotiation to run its course.

Now that local government budgets are a reality and the cuts are beginning to bite, even the conservative bureaucracy of Unison has little choice but to move into action.

This is no time for "too little, too late" cynicism. Socialists and other militants working in local government should seize on the Southampton strikes and the Birmingham and Doncaster ballots as evidence that council workers can be mobilised against cuts and argue for the struggles to spread.

The mass strike on 30 June — involving civil servants, teachers and lecturers — will send a loud message to the government. The more workers involved, the louder the message.

But creative strategies like the one adopted in Southampton — based, as it has been, on regular mass cross-union meetings where grassroots members can have a say in the direction of the dispute — can do more than just send a message or act as a symbolic protest; they can exert real industrial pressure on bosses and government that could potentially stop them in their tracks.

In as many areas as possible, 30 June should see join meetings — meeting with debate, not just rallies — of the different groups of strikers, to formulate plans to follow up 30 June with more action on the model of Southampton.

• More on Southampton, page 11.

Defend Dale Farm!

By Bill Holmes

Hundreds of travellers face eviction from a site in Essex after the Home Office said it would cough up half the cash for a costly police operation.

Local councillors on Basildon District Council voted in April to evict 96 families from the Dale Farm site near Crays Hill, Basildon.

Essex Police estimated the cost of policing the eviction — not the actual operation itself — would be £9.2 million. Previously Basildon Council couldn't afford that figure, so the travellers stayed in their homes, on their own land.

Now the government has come to the rescue of its Tory friends in Essex. The Department for Communities and Local Government will contribute £1.2 million towards the eviction, and

the Home Office has pledged up to £4.65 million.

Basildon Council has set aside up to £8 million of its own funds to pay for the eviction, while Essex Police have promised £3 million.

To put this into perspective, another local council in Essex, Tendring District Council, is looking to make a similar amount of "savings" over the next four years, and there is talk of this being achieved in part by making around 200 people redundant.

Tory council leader Tony Ball said: "I am delighted the Government has recognised the importance of addressing this as a national issue, not just an issue for Basildon."

He is right in one respect. This should be a national issue — a national scandal.

Dale Farm is the largest travellers' site in England and the largest encamp-

ment in Europe. The families living there have received a lot of support from gypsy and Romany families across Europe who have themselves been facing increasing racist harassment, evictions and deportation especially from Silvio Berlusconi and Nicolas Sarkozy.

Thousands of people from across the world have pledged to protest and form a human barrier in the event of an eviction attempt, with hundreds of activists saying they will dig in near to the site to stop the authorities moving in.

Travellers at Dale Farm are hopeful a recent directive from the EU Commission, which has placed a deadline of the end of 2011 on Governments to provide suitable alternative accommodation and schools for gypsies and travellers, will give them a reprieve.

But we cannot rely on EU bureaucrats to defend human rights — we must take action ourselves.

Activists around the country are mobilising ready to move to Dale Farm as soon as a 28 day eviction notice is served on the site.

It is no accident that the same government whose policies have been given the seal of approval by the right-wing global bankers' body, the IMF, can also find millions of pounds to make people homeless and trample on their human rights.

This money would be much better spent supporting the vulnerable, providing food and shelter and education for those who need it — including travellers who have always been consistently discriminated against on all these issues.

• dalefarm.wordpress.com

Build solidarity with London postal workers!

By Jean Lane

An emergency motion passed unanimously at the Communication Workers Union conference called on sorting offices all over the country to refuse to handle mail from three London mail centres threatened with closure. This is likely to cause unofficial walkouts as union members get suspended for refusing to carry out an instruction from management.

In the meantime, a ballot of the mail centres — Nine Elms, Rathbone Place and Twelvetreces Crescent — was returned with a yes vote for industrial action. This is not

being acted on while talks are in process, but it is expected that the ballot of the centres under threat will be acted on soon; ballots of delivery offices are also likely soon.

The cause of the dispute is the flawed agreement that came out of the last lot of strikes two years ago.

Management are backtracking on that agreement which had stated that any closures of mail centres would be "staff friendly" and would not cause compulsory redundancies.

However, the threatened closures (and huge cuts at Mount Pleasant) could not possibly be done, according to the union, without causing

compulsory redundancies. They will also include mass compulsory transfer of staff from one office to another.

"Many of our members believe that this is being done deliberately as pay back for the last round of strikes", one union rep in east London told *Solidarity*.

"These closures are being done to attack the union, not to make the service more efficient as they claim".

There is also the belief that a breaking up the service into bite-size pieces is going on — enabling privatisation more easily. "The union nationally has now got to work hard to keep reps and members all over the

country well-informed so that any office threatened with suspension knows they will be supported by others elsewhere".

When I asked what other trade unionists and anti-cuts activists can do to support postal workers, the union rep told me: "Watch this space."

Anti-cuts committees, trades councils and joint union committees should start preparing for the solidarity and support which could be needed at very short notice.

No worker is safe and no union is safe in Con Dem hands. It's just that the CWU are next in line for the brunt of the attack.

• Vince Cable at GMB conference, page 11

Doncaster Unison protest